UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/AC.96/SR.533
7 December 1998

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 533rd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 9 October 1998 at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. RODRIGUEZ CEDEÑO (Venezuela)

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GE.98-03357 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE FORTY-NINTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (document without a symbol) (agenda item 11)

1. The CHAIRMAN invited the Rapporteur to introduce the report of the forty-ninth session.

2. Mr. LIU Xinsheng (Rapporteur) thanked those delegations whose flexibility and spirit of dialogue and cooperation during informal consultations had made it possible to reach consensus on the decisions and conclusions contained in the report.

3. The report of the forty-ninth session of the Executive Committee was adopted.

CLOSING STATEMENT BY THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

4. Mrs. OGATA (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) thanked the delegations which had participated in the work of the forty-ninth session of the Executive Committee. The sheer number of participants showed that interest in refugees was growing. Despite the great variety of subjects discussed, certain common concerns had been flagged, such as the continued need for international protection for those forced to leave their homes as a result of violence and persecution, which was a matter requiring global solidarity. In that regard, UNHCR had been pleased to note that most delegations had strongly reaffirmed their commitment to protecting refugees and sharing the burden which they represented. However, it was true that the international community had paid insufficient attention to the cost of carrying out those responsibilities, and particularly the responsibilities devolving on countries which had given asylum to large groups of refugees. The issue of resources in the widest sense remained a key element in the refugee debate. The political, social and environmental consequences of the successive crises in Africa or the mass influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, had been as substantial as their economic cost. UNHCR lacked the means to redress all the current imbalances, but it could act as an instrument for the more equitable sharing of refugee responsibilities.

5. Regarding UNHCR's role, the distinction between protection and assistance was an artificial one. Anyone who had visited a refugee camp would recognize the protection value of a food distribution system or plastic sheeting, both of which not only helped refugees to survive, but also enabled personnel working for UNHCR and non-governmental organizations to establish direct contact with refugees and displaced persons. That said, the protection of refugees, returnees and, where appropriate, other victims of forced displacement would remain the top priority of all UNHCR operations.

6. Regarding the doubts expressed by some delegations about UNHCR's role in returnee reintegration activities, it should be recalled that UNHCR's involvement in that crucial phase of the displacement cycle had been requested and endorsed by the Executive Committee itself. The stabilization of returnees was an indispensable element in the reconciliation of divided

communities and, as such, in post-conflict resolution. Such a process could also have some preventive value in avoiding further displacements. UNHCR's efforts in that field had been hampered by a growing gap between humanitarian and development assistance, a gap which had been commented on by a number of delegations. Development partners should be able to intervene expeditiously, but that was often difficult because they had not been present on the ground during the conflict and because they lacked resources in the post-conflict phase. UNHCR was determined to make every effort to bridge the gap and considered that it had a duty to do so in respect of countries emerging from years of conflict, such as Liberia, which lacked the necessary infrastructure to receive mass influxes of returnees.

7. UNHCR had been pleased to note the support for initiatives to create an international framework for solutions to refugee problems such as ICARA, CIREFCA and the Comprehensive Plan of Action. A number of delegations had also expressed their support for new initiatives such as the regional return strategy in the former Yugoslavia, the process set in motion by the Kampala regional meeting on refugees and the CIS conference. Nonetheless, international support was needed more than ever to identify rapid solutions to the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan and Kosovo. Cooperation should also be stepped up to counteract various factors that exacerbated conflicts such as the trade in small arms, the plague of landmines and the traffic in human beings.

8. UNHCR also welcomed the fact that certain industrialized countries had reported improvements in asylum procedures which, it was hoped, would not be coupled with a trend towards a restrictive interpretation of refugee law. Those States which had announced an increase in their refugee resettlement quotas were also to be commended. Lastly, expressing its gratitude to Governments which had pledged their additional financial support, UNHCR reiterated the need to make every effort to establish a flexible and predictable funding base while at the same time endeavouring to improve resource management and strengthen the transparency of evaluation activities.

CLOSURE OF THE SESSION (agenda item 12)

9. The CHAIRMAN declared the forty-ninth session of the Executive Committee closed.

The meeting rose at 10.45 a.m.